

WORKING WITH NON-EUROPEAN CHILDREN

(The work of the Hilary Leys Memorial Wing, Leys Institute Branch, Auckland Public Libraries)

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Our children's library is different—our borrowers are different, many of the books on our shelves are different, and I like to think that the staff who work so tirelessly, cheerfully and unendingly with these children are amongst the most devoted in the field. But only to the Trustees of the Hilary Leys Memorial Wing must go the credit for the germ of an idea which has spread and grown like a tree. Certainly the tree is not fully grown, some of the branches may be a little ragged, many leaves have fallen but the roots dig deeper and the trunk is strong and healthy.

Here at the Leys Institute Branch of the Auckland Public Library we work amongst children of many nationalities, children whose background and heritage differ in all respects from their European neighbours, but who gather in one place to learn, to read, to play, discuss and work in the tradition established by William Leys and his brother Dr T. W. Leys.

As far as can be ascertained, the first children's library in Australasia was opened at the Institute in 1909 and the founding of the Wing in 1958 (1) was merely a continuation of much hard work done in the intervening years. But the Wing is large and airy and sunny with a panoramic view over Auckland harbour—masses of room for the children of the closely confined suburb of Ponsonby. Add to this a wealth of audio-visual equipment and a permanent children's librarian and there seems no reason why the Wing should not have been a success from the moment of opening. Admittedly success was ours, but so very quietly Ponsonby was changing. The immigration of the Polynesian and Indian peoples had begun. The houses once owned by Europeans now became the homes of Pacific families, and away to the borders of Grey Lynn was a growing community of Indians. On Sunday mornings the streets were full of Island families wending their way to the Pacific Islands Church, the shops began to stock

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unfamiliar yams, taro and breadfruit, and the women shopping in the morning wore graceful saris, lava-lavas and pulatasis.

If it had not been for an idea, originated by the Trustees of the Wing, Mr and Mrs T. H. Leys and Mr G. T. Upton, the local library may still have been conducting its daily business in the traditional manner while the community it was supposed to serve grew out of all recognition. This then is the background of the "Improvers' Collection".

HOW THE "IMPROVERS' COLLECTION" BEGAN

In the beginning the social value of a programme like this was not envisaged. It began because parents found it difficult to buy or even borrow suitable reading material in sufficient quantity for their children who were either slow or lazy readers. It must be emphasised that at no stage was it proposed to deal with children who were clinically handicapped in their reading ability. The challenge of the idea immediately appealed to the staff, main library and children's, and this enthusiasm plus a grant of \$2,000 from the Leys Institute Building and Endowment Trust left by Sir Cecil Leys, provided the foundation.

Generally speaking, most librarians working in public libraries are not over familiar with graded basic vocabulary material simply because it has been traditional to cater only for the good or average reader. Book funds also, do not extend to the buying of these readers, which in the main are of American imprint and consequently expensive. The staff had first to read extensively books dealing specifically in this field and discuss freely and exhaustively with teachers and representatives of publishing houses who produced books for this type of child.

In fairness it must be stated that a minority of teachers were adamant that under no circumstances should this proposed collection be made directly available to the children themselves, but only to the teacher, for without specialised teaching, training and appreciation, library staff could undo any progress being made at school. This viewpoint further daunted our efforts, until at a meeting of local headmasters and teachers, specially convened for attacking this problem, it was overwhelmingly decided that the original idea of making the books available for home loan was to be pursued.

With this surface background, we ordered pilot sets of books so that we could assess for ourselves their individual quality. The name of the collection was not given lightly. Something along the lines of the School Library Service's "Books for Backward Readers" was first suggested but the Trustees were definite that the final name should bear not the slightest stigma. The word "improvers" was an honourable one and could be applied to every borrower of a public library.

ON THE WAY

We continued to scan endless lists, to read graded reader after graded reader for ourselves, to learn to apply and relate reading age

levels and interest levels, and to continually question teachers and representatives for any added information they could give. At no stage were we able to reap, from the experiences of any librarian in New Zealand, something that could help us in what we were gradually discovering to be a completely new public library field. In order that the books could be kept for the children who needed them, identity cards were sent to all local schools asking the teachers to supply the details of any child who they considered might benefit from the collection. The child then brought the card to the library and the contact was made.

As early as this it was discovered that the collection was going to fulfil a purpose hitherto not dreamed about. For many of the children now coming to the library, it was their first visit. The supply had created the demand!

It was with an impact that we realised a growing percentage of these children were of non-European background—Indian, Maori, Niue and Cook Islanders, Tongans, Samoans, and Tahitians, with a small (European) group of Yugoslav and Dutch. These children had not ventured inside the library doors before because there had been nothing on our shelves for them, but once the link was established and each child discovered that he or she was able to take home a book written in the simple English they could understand, the hardest part was over. The consumer and the commodity had been brought together.

DIFFICULTIES OF THE PLAN IN ACTION

The mechanics of any public borrowing system can at times prove difficult. The idea of having a book back by a set date was new! Parents in many cases did not care either way, many could not speak good English and could write none at all. Damage to books and loss of books were all problems which had to be treated in the right perspective, for we did not want to frighten away these youngsters.

By this time, the Institute control had been transferred to the Auckland Public Library and we became only one library in a system of ten, but it must be recorded that patience, tolerance and sympathy on the part of the administration, ensured that we could persevere with this work. The reward was the growing knowledge that after a few lapses most children were eager to co-operate and loath to lose the privilege of belonging to this new found home of theirs. Some Island parents, having once received letters from "authority" in the form of an overdue notice were tempted to remove their children from further indiscretions, and it was up to the staff to convince them that this was a retrograde step, not to be contemplated lightly. The library had already become a centre for European children and with the changing face of Ponsonby and Herne Bay, it had to be the same for the non-Europeans.

The original concept of the Hilary Leys Memorial Wing was that it should be a gathering place and activity centre for the children of

the neighbourhood. The library programmes, as devised by the children's librarians, have encouraged participation by the children to the "nth" degree and in the eight years of its history, there has been endless slog, much publicity, experimenting with ideas which were successful, others which were frankly unsuccessful, and the acquainting of a long line of headmasters with our hopes and plans.

It has been calculated that the average child reads only 400 books between the years of 5 and 15 years. English is a second language for many of our children so naturally this figure is, for them, much smaller. Add to this the environmental problem plus the fact that many families move from Ponsonby to the outer suburb of Otara where no library exists and it will be realised that the library has got to move fast while the children are available.

WAYS OF PUTTING THE PROGRAMME INTO ACTION

1. Teaching and library staff meet frequently, either at formal meetings, over afternoon tea or by a hurried dash to the school to discuss a special problem.
2. The children's librarian arranges 30 class visits a month. The dominant theme is that "Books are fun". Class visits must be fun too and essentially the period is a "doing" one—giving the children confidence and independence in the use of a library.
3. *Music* has played an important part in the class visit, especially with the special language classes. At the beginning of the school year, these classes consist of children who have no common language, nor do they speak English. Music then is the one common denominator, and records and tape recordings have been used with success.
4. Board games, music, records, tape recordings, story hours, holiday programs, library club activities, chess club, puppet club plus infinite patience on the part of the staff were methods of bringing in the children. No matter if they visited the library every day after school for a year, simply to play games, *eventually* they would ask to join the library.
5. The introduction of a television set merits attention. At a time when television was new to Auckland, a set in the library brought in hordes of children and they established a pattern of borrowing and library visiting which has not been diminished.
6. Continued publicity with the schools—ten in all—circulars about all library activities, with at least one buffet meal meeting of local teaching staffs and the library staff, where ideas are pooled and where the experiences of long-standing teachers can be transmitted to the newcomers.

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The Work of the Hilary Leys Memorial Wing



Learning library habits

Photos: Peter Brennan

Library chess club meeting



5
4
3
2
1
8



School visit—"use of the catalogue" session. The use of the catalogue is also taught through group competitions

Photos: Peter Brennan

Story hour!





The "test your classification" fixture, made by a member of a library club. The notice reads: "Select the question you wish to answer and put one wire on the screw directly below the question. Then put the other wire on the screw directly below the answer you have picked. If you are right the light will shine."

Photos: Peter Brenner

Story hour—epilogue! (In school class visits the children also record their own book reviews on tape.)



7. Use of the children as a school team; e.g. the Maori Club of Ponsonby School entertained invited guests of the library before a lecture by the journalist Harry Dansey. (The Maori Club incidentally comprises members from India, China, all Polynesian races with a sprinkling of Europeans, and one Maori.)
8. Most children are creative and the non-European children respond well to arranging displays in the Wing, planning holiday activities, visits to printing presses, a bindery, etc. Many of these children lack a solid home background and are establishing a habit of library visiting despite their families.
9. Staff at all times have to be prepared for the library and its grounds to be used as a general meeting place by "the kids of the neighbourhood". A very fine balance has to be kept between encouraging them to come to the library and yet not allowing them to upset the more stable atmosphere of the adult library. Indian children are by nature, quiet and reserved but all Island children are full of mischief, fun and laughter, and a staff member has to have the goal always before her of balancing orthodox adult library practices with unorthodox juvenile library practices.
10. To one of the special schools, situated in the inner city, we run a mobile library service, once a week. The following table will indicate the problems that surround a school of this type:

<i>Nationality of Children</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Maori	14
Samoan	19
Cook Islanders	22
Niuean Islanders	21
Indian	2
Chinese	4
Other (Tahitian, Hungarian, Yugoslav, N.Z.)	18

But the fun and pleasure everyone derives from this service—the bundling into our private cars, the boxes of books, the children who dive for them the moment we arrive, the eager sorting, choosing, issuing in the school playground, the happy "Goodbyes" as we drive away, is worth the effort every time.

- 11 The introduction, to our children's stock, of books in Polynesian languages, through the courtesy of the Dept. of Island Territories has been a worthwhile adjunct to our programme. These, together with newspapers from the Islands prove to the children and indirectly to their parents that we as a library are prepared to change our ideas for the benefit of the community we serve.

12. Books. Let it be clearly emphasised that without the basic vocabulary readers, there is no point in encouraging these children to our library. In our opinion it would be impossible to make any headway with only such titles as are included in the Beginner and Easy to Read series. Learning to read in a language not always spoken in their homes is a long and difficult task, to be calculated in years, not months. BOOKS, MORE BOOKS, and EVEN MORE BOOKS in English easily understood must be the basis on which is to be built a normal reading habit and love of the written word.

SUCCESS OR NO SUCCESS? ARE WE ON THE RIGHT ROAD?

Yes, we believe we are—for if we had not, quite by accident changed our way of life in the children's library, we may have found by 1967 that the Hilary Leys Memorial Wing was a monument and nothing else. Children who came to us needing remedial readers have advanced into academic forms, continued as devoted members of the library contributing to its life as their talents allow, and in one case, a Cook Island girl has become a competent schoolgirl assistant on Friday evenings, hoping eventually to become a full-time library assistant.

Referring to the earlier opposition we encountered, it is interesting to note that the psychology section of the Department of Education expressed interest in the Collection and is now sending parents with their children to our library. With these children the story has almost turned a full cycle for it is the availability of the books that the psychologists see as a furtherance of their own clinical work. Having either managed to get a child interested in reading or to read at all, their work is made futile by the lack of material.

A further example is the Child Welfare Department paying for a subscription for a boy far from Auckland. Basic vocabulary books, the officer feels, are the answer to the problem he has encountered.

Headmasters of schools outside our Auckland City Council area, have, unknown to us, circularised parents whose children have reading problems, advising them to enrol their children as subscribers. Our own headmasters have backed us with the fullest co-operation and are adamant that the Improvers' Collection is an extension of the work they are doing in school hours.

SOME CRITICISM

Many of our ideas have been revolutionary and have not always met the requirements of standard library practice, but we justify these by the results. The Collection is housed in sets as opposed to the idea of author and subject classification, but having found a series which interests him, the child will naturally progress through the other titles. Many of these children give up easily and this attitude we have to combat. Abridged books (in the main, classics) have met the approval

of teachers and children. A comprehensive programme of school class visits taking up the morning of each day and often the afternoon as well, certainly restricts the normal library routine but it is the only way to tap our future borrowers, and much as this type of visit requires resourcesfulness on the part of the school timetable, the teachers and headmasters have co-operated fully.

The general library view of stocking these specially graded readers is that this field is legitimately the field of education authorities and should not be a tax on the city or borough ratepayer. This viewpoint very definitely holds water, for local authorities are not over generous with book fund grants and they barely cover the necessities of the general reading public. In our domestic situation with \$4,000 already spent we are unique and eternally grateful for such far-seeing benefactors. But in Auckland, reputedly the largest Polynesian city south of the line, the need for this material is great and likely to increase. Who "foots the bill" is a question which will be difficult to resolve. All that we can say is that having ventured out into this field, one in which we admittedly still have much to learn, we have learned that the education authorities, from members of the Department itself, down to the newest infant mistress, have helped, co-operated and encouraged to the utmost, emphasising that the Library is a part of the whole, not a separate unit. Colleagues, friends and workers have pulled together in one of the most satisfying fulfilments of the library field—to introduce books, to create a love for them, where none had been before.

Our idea of a library is this one:

A library is a place for searching in—

A place for learning in—

A place for working in—

A library is a place to have fun in —

A library is a place to be alone in

And to be together in—

To be enjoyed.

A library is worth planning for

Worth walking to

Worth riding to

Worth being part of.

Reference

- 1 RIDLING, C. Hilary Leys Memorial Wing: a new children's library. *New Zealand libraries* 21no7:142-7, Oc 1958.